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ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION

OPSBA
RESPONSE
TO THE
FORMATIVE YEARS CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

December 1990

92-07988/

INTRODUCTION

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Ministry of Education consultation paper on The Formative Years. The restructuring of education that is to occur over the next few years involves all facets of education from the early years of schooling to the transition to the world of work or post-secondary education. This restructuring cannot be done without adequate consultation. The Ministry of Education is to be commended for the establishment of a comprehensive and varied consultation process which ensures the early and continuing involvement of the key parties in the development of education policies resulting from the restructuring initiatives. The six month timeframe for response to the consultation documents enables our Association to adequately consult with our Member Boards and is a welcome departure from previously established practice. Hopefully, the framework for consultation developed for these initiatives will become the standard for other areas of government as well.

OPSBA, however, has a number of concerns with both the approach being taken in examining the education of children in the first six years of compulsory schooling and the way in which the consultation document is structured and worded.

Framework for Discussion

OPSBA is disappointed with the consultation document placing its emphasis on a number of very specific questions related to curriculum organization and implemention. There is no overall framework which clearly states the goals of education and within which discussions on the formative years takes place. There is no clear understanding of the role of schools and what they are expected to achieve.

Before one can attempt to effectively deal with specific questions related to both the nature of education in the formative years and curriculum development, a provincial framework is required which describes the purpose of schooling, the intended outcomes and sensible objectives for change.

Education in the formative years is being treated as if it occurs in a vacuum without an appreciation of what goes before or what comes after. Education must be viewed as a continuum in which the various segments are integrated as opposed to being treated in isolation. Collaboration at both ends of this school segment is essential before one can comment on issues related to curriculum or school organization. This lack of cohesiveness with what comes before and what comes after is due, in part, to the absence of an overall framework within which to formulate discussions.

A Suggested Alternative

In order to engage in genuine consultation, develop alternatives which will make a real difference in the education of children, and to assist in an understanding of the child as a learner; OPSBA recommends that:

> **Before a detailed examination of the various segments of education occurs, there must first be consultation on the overall goals of education; what we want to achieve by the end of mandatory schooling for every student; and what is the role of the schools in this process.**

Once consensus has been reached on the overall goals of education and a framework is in place, then it will be possible to work backwards and ask such questions as: In order to achieve these goals and based on what we know about child development at particular ages what are the curricular objectives for specific age groups? What are ways in which these objectives can be met? What structural arrangements need to be considered? How can achievement of these objectives be measured?

This approach has a number of advantages. It would provide the cohesiveness required for all the restructuring initiatives. It would avoid the current perception that the formative years curricula can be developed without regard for what comes before and what comes after. It will ensure that any consensus which is built with regards to what the education of the child in the formative years will look like, is based on a common framework of understanding of the role of education, the vision of the learner, and the importance of social and economic factors in structuring education and curriculum.

In addition to the implementation of a consultation process to aid in establishing a framework within which to formulate discussions on the specific components of the restructuring initiatives; a mechanism for coordination of the various Ministry restructuring activities is required. OPSBA therefore recommends that:

> **The Ministry of Education establish a coordinating workteam which will not only develop the consultation document on the overall framework within which the specific initiatives related to the various segments of education are to be considered, but would ensure that the various workteams are drafting their consultation documents with the same understanding of the goals of education.**

Specific Concerns

If the recommendations with regard to both the consultation process and the way in which the initiatives are structured within the Ministry of Education itself are adopted, they will alleviate a number of specific concerns OPSBA has with the consultation document on the formative years. There are a number of issues central to education in the formative years which are not addressed in a substantive manner in the issues and options section of the document or in the working paper.

These concerns include a narrow view of the child as a learner; the lack of serious consideration of the role of social factors in the development of curriculum; the absence of discussion of the pivotal role the teacher performs in the process; and, the failure of the document to deal with special education or multiculturalism issues.

Education of the child does not occur in a vacuum. The role of social factors in education must be clearly articulated and identified. There must be a broad view of the learner in which the various factors that influence the learning process are considered. In keeping pace with what is happening outside the system, schools have had to offer many additional services that go beyond providing an education. Discussions related to curriculum must also be placed within the current social context and the limited resources that are now available for education.

The lack of overall coordination and the artificial fragmentation of the issues is most evident in the lack of discussion, in the consultation document, of the role of the teacher in the formative years. Teacher training needs to be addressed as an integral part of all the consultation documents for unless the teaching staff is in place the rest of the suggested changes and aims will not be implemented in the classroom. Once a general framework is developed, this can serve as the basis for answering the question, "what kind of teacher is required who will be sensitive to the various factors that influence how the child learns?"

Special education, which is a significant component of the education of children in the formative years is minimally addressed in working paper. There is the need for a continuum of service for these children from segregated schools to full integration in the classroom with appropriate support available. A separate examination of the role of special education needs to be addressed by the Ministry of Education workteams.

Any document on the formative years must deal effectively with questions of multiculturalism, race and ethnic relations and the impact of immigration. For example, by the year 2000 approximately two-thirds of the children in Metro Toronto area could be classified English as

a Second Language (ESL) and support, both financial and curricular must be given for these programs.

Finally, if the desire of the Ministry of Education is to engage in genuine consultation, then the documents designed to stimulate discussion must be organized and written in such a manner to encourage this process. The document must be written in a language that can be easily understood and avoids educational jargon. The Formative Years consultation document does not meet these criteria.

ISSUES AND OPTIONS

Many of the issues identified in the consultation document cannot be dealt with in a substantive manner until the central question of the role of education in the formative years is adequately addressed. In addition, the issues and options identified in the consultation paper are closely inter-related and decisions/approaches in one section will, of necessity, influence discussion on the other.

It is difficult to choose one option over another without a clear idea of what we are hoping to achieve in the formative years. As a result, OPSBA will make general comments on the issues under discussion and identify a number of concerns which we feel need to be addressed by the workteam but will not state its preference for any given option.

Issue #1 - What should be the basic learning expectations for children in the formative years?

As already discussed, the basic learning expectations for children in the formative years must relate to the overall goals for education in this province. The basic foundation skills must be clearly defined in relation to the general goals of education in Ontario and an understanding of child development during the formative years.

There are a number of suggestions in the working paper section of the consultation document that imply a lack of understanding of child development in the formative years. For example, in the section on cross-curricular learning as one of the four broad curricular areas of study in the formative years, it is stated that "understanding and appreciating the important values of Canadian society, including cooperation, freedom, honesty, justice, moderation, respect for diversity, responsibility, self-discipline, sensitivity, tolerance, and an appreciation of excellence and beauty, contributes to the development of good citizenship". Based on current views of child development, it would be possible to introduce the child to some of these concepts but to instill an understanding and appreciation of these values would be beyond their ability.

Since there does not currently exist a clear understanding of the goals of education or a stated framework within which curriculum in the formative years can be determined; it is difficult to state what the basic learning expectations for children in the formative years should be. We will, therefore, limit ourselves to a number of general comments on the issue and to specific concerns/questions related to the aims as articulated in the Working Paper.

Curriculum in the formative years must relate to what has gone before and what comes after and should reflect learning expectations from JK to OAC.

A great deal has been said in recent years about the "crowded curriculum" in which additional subjects have been added to the curriculum on an ad hoc basis without concern for the overall approach to what is to be taught. This "add-on" approach to curriculum should not continue. Instead, there should be an integrated approach to curriculum in which any one area is not given precedence over others.

Concerns have also been expressed that when you widen the curriculum and increase specialization you decrease the amount of integration between areas of the curriculum. This has been caused, in part, by the increasing practice of a number of schools to have several different specialist teachers for each child. OPSBA would encourage a cross-curricular approach to teaching.

With regard to the specific curriculum outlined in the working paper, OPSBA has identified a number of questions/comments that need to be addressed by the workteam:

1. Have we widened the current description of curriculum if we accept the definition included in the working paper that regards "curriculum as all children's experiences for which school systems are responsible"?

2. Are the aims listed in the working paper the core curriculum for every student in Ontario or do they describe anything that might be in the curriculum? Can different areas of the province choose and adapt the aims to fit their needs?

3. The Ministry should prioritize some of these aims. Presented as they are the task of accomplishing them seems almost overwhelming.

4. The document doesn't specify learning expectations within age ranges.

Issue #2 - What divisional organization should be used for the description of the formative years policy and curriculum?

Although this question appears to be rather straightforward in asking how one is to manage curriculum, the way in which policy and curriculum documents are organized impacts on the way in which schools are organized, consultants are hired, benchmarks determined and promotion policies developed.

Once again, once cannot choose one option over another without an understanding of the general goals and objectives for the formative years. If the Formative years are separated into two distinct units (Primary and Junior for example), on what basis is this decision made? Is it assumed that education in these two areas is somehow different; that the goals are somehow different; and that there are distinct curriculum expectations for each division? How do the divisions relate to the concept of education as a continuum?

On what basis are divisions to be made - on the basis of age or on the basis of grades?

How does divisional organization relate to the idea of continuous assessment and individual programming? How does divisional organization relate to the idea of benchmarks?

Changing the general direction of education in any sector of education is costly and requires extensive teacher inservice and must not be done without a clear understanding of how these changes fit into an overall framework.

Issue #3 - How should provincial curriculum be organized and described for educator and public reference?

OPSBA has few concerns with regard to this issue in which the organization for curriculum proposed in the Working Paper appears to be relevant to the needs of the learners for the decade ahead.

This issue, of necessity, ties back to issue #2 in which divisional organization for the development of policy and curriculum documents are discussed. Groupings are important for school boards since they relate to how teachers combine subjects and teach them.

Any discussion of curriculum organization must recognize the importance of cross-curricular teaching and the elimination of artificial distinctions between subjects.

Issue #4 - What provincial curriculum documents should be developed?

Before consensus can be reached on the number or type of documents that should be available to school boards or who should be responsible for developing these documents, consideration must be given to a number of key issues.

OPSBA recognizes that there is the need for consistency in goals for children across the province with regard to basic/core/foundation curriculum but we do not want the development of additional documents resulting in more teacher specialization and the loss of cross-curricular integration.

If the goals of education are clearly articulated and the curriculum objectives for the formative years developed, there has to be assurances that all children in the province are given equal opportunity to the same education regardless of their geographic location or the wealth of their local school board.

It is important for the Ministry of Education to provide sufficient policy guidelines to ensure consistency across the province in key areas of curriculum. However, the guidelines must not be extremely prescriptive and should encourage curriculum integration. Provincial policy must allow for interpretation by Boards and for individual schools to professionally meet the needs of local communities.

Various alternatives need to be examined which will allow for the sharing of high quality second generation curriculum documents already in existence.

The possibility of a curriculum clearing house as opposed to strict prescriptive documents needs to be given serious consideration. The development of curriculum is very expensive and methods of sharing and cooperation need to be developed.

If provincial grants continue to decline it may be necessary for the provincial government to produce even more policy guidelines and additional resource documents as middle sized and small boards will not have the resources (human or material) to develop local curriculum documents.

Issue #5 - For which points of children's learning in the formative years should benchmarks be identified?

The question of benchmarks has been debated in a number of different forums in recent years and two recurring themes dominate the discussion about the evaluation of student achievement: general standards and specific diagnostic information which could help teachers to be more effective.

We have to somehow reconcile the justifiable public call for accountability with our improved understanding of how human beings learn. Educators must find ways of being accountable and comprehensive without reverting to obsolete understandings of achievement and testing.

It is not possible to identify for which points of children's learning in the formative years benchmarks should be identified until there is a clear understanding of what is being measured. There needs to be clearly articulated general goals for education and specific objectives for the formative years developed before benchmarks can be established.

Even once the general goals of education are identified and the specific objectives for the formative years developed, it is not an easy task to either identify specific benchmarks or to develop adequate measures that accurately reflect whether certain benchmarks have been achieved. Obtaining high test scores on traditional pencil and paper tests does not necessarily indicate good education or much of anything else.

The kinds of benchmarks developed depend on the purpose for which they are designed - as a basis for individual assessment or for accountability.

If the purpose of benchmarks is to serve as the basis for individual assessment, not only must they relate to the overall view of the child as a learner but one must also ask such questions as: "What we are going to do with the results?" How will they affect the child in the classroom? How do they relate to the development of remedial programs for individual students?

The working paper is very confusing on the issues of learning outcomes and benchmarks. "Learning outcomes articulate a flexible continuum of developmental learning which allows for normal variation in the pace and sequence of children's learning". But "benchmarks are statements of critical learning outcomes that students are expected to demonstrate at a given point in time". These two concepts are very different and reflect two very different philosophies of the child as a learner. It is difficult to find the balance between the flexible

view of the child as a learner progressing at her or his own rate and the idea of benchmarks in which each child must reach a certain point at a certain time in their schooling.

If the prime role of benchmarks is the monitoring of curriculum implementation as opposed to the assessment of individual students; then different kinds of measures need to be employed.

Issue #6 - What should be the provincial policy concerning the promotion of children?
The question of promotion policies cannot be considered in isolation from questions related to the way in which schools are organized, the general goals of education in the formative years and the role of benchmarks in individual assessment.

It is generally recognized that retention and repeating the same material is ineffective and does not contribute to students improving their learning ability. The practice of retention contradicts the Ministry's goal of helping students realize their potential. Ideally, primary/junior education supports age appropriate placement with required remedial and preventive programs involving early and ongoing identification as the norm.

OPSBA would like to stress that consultation on student progression should involve all parties - the student, parents, the teacher, the principal and the Supervisory Officer, if necessary. Parent concerns and requests should be given full consideration.

Whatever system is implemented, once again there must be room for flexibility and adaptation to local conditions in order to best meet the learning needs of the student.

Issue #7 - What should be the provincial direction concerning the organization of children within the school?
The way in which children are organized within the school is closely tied in with the general goals of education, the specific objectives for the formative years and the general view of the child as a learner. This issue cannot be considered in isolation from the way in which younger children and older children in the education continuum are organized.

Whatever method of organization is developed, there is the need for flexibility. It appears that the present grade system does not serve this level well and might be improved upon by a less-rigid structure. One option that should be considered is age-appropriate placement and/or progression within a division.

The current direction regarding school organization allows boards and local schools to use a variety of organizational approaches. These approaches are dependent upon the needs and wishes of the community, the geographic location of schools, available transportation, space and school size.

Whatever changes are proposed, they should not occur before there is a clear understanding of the impact of those changes. Change must not occur without prior consultation with parents, students and the community. Changes in school organization in other jurisdictions should be taken into account and assessed. Consideration should be given to the role of pilot projects.

Issue #8 - What should be the provincial direction concerning the provision of support systems for schools?

In keeping pace with what is happening outside the system, schools have had to offer many additional services that go well beyond providing an education. Education has taken on social, cultural and health responsibilities that had previously been funded and provided by, other agencies and institutions. Schools have assumed an ever-expanding responsibility to respond to the needs of all children. These needs cannot be ignored. Young people will not learn until some of their other social and physical problems are dealt with.

But the capacity of school systems to provide the services that would be helpful to children at risk for social, emotional or behavioral problems is sorely limited. We have neither the formal mandate nor the resources. We face, as do other sectors, the transfer of funding responsibilities from the provincial to the local level. At the same time, we are faced with a public response that appears to say that education costs are rising too rapidly.

The school system must be a key partner in the development of new service delivery models. If the focus is to be on prevention and early intervention, then it is clear that the only agency that has daily contact with children and youth is the school.

This expanded role for schools is most visibly seen in the need for guidance counselling and social work services in the schools.

With regard to guidance counselling, there is concern that the responsibility for guidance should not fall on the teacher who is inadequately trained to provide this service. It should be the responsibility of educators to provide career guidance and a first level of counselling for students, however, indepth counselling must be provided through professionally trained

mental health staff sponsored by provincially funded programs.

The need for increased parent education and the development of home-schools linkages must be addressed. Research has shown (Epstein 1986) that it is not the home that is the cause of some children's lack of success in school, but rather it is, in substantial part, the lack of connection between home and school.

As a first step for dealing with the expanded role of schools, the mandates of the Ministries of Education, Health and Community and Social Services must be more clearly defined at the policy level. The education of the child is a shared responsibility and this must be recognized through cooperation and the transfer of appropriate funds and/or human resources between these Ministries. It is unreasonable to expect schools to meet the current needs with the current levels and methods of funding.

It may be time to re-examine the possibility of the establishment of a Ministry of the Child.

This policy and financial clarification at a Ministerial level must include the definition and requirement for collaboration and integration of services at the community level where boards and social agencies must work in partnership.

SUMMARY and CONCLUSIONS

Many of the issues identified in the consultation document cannot be dealt with in any substantive manner until the central role of education in the formative years is addressed. Before one can attempt to effectively deal with specific questions related both to the nature of education in the formative years and curriculum development, a provincial framework which describes the purpose of schooling, the intended outcomes and sensible objectives for change is required.

As a result, in its response to the consultation document, OPSBA did not choose one option over another but made general comments on the issues under discussion and identified a number of concerns which need to be addressed by the Ministry of Education Formative Years Workteam.

In order to engage in genuine consultation, develop alternatives which will make a real difference in the education of children, and to assist in an understanding of the child as a learner; OPSBA has recommended a process for dealing with these issues. The process involves both a restructuring of the Ministry of Education workteams dealing with educational initiatives and the development of a framework for the role of education in this province.